In this article the authors describe the programmed and scripted nature of many mandated instructional and “management” programs designed to raise test scores of urban children in low-income communities. They detail the programs’ dehumanizing effect on the ways teachers and students interact, and the resentment the programs instill in the children they are supposed to benefit. The authors then show how one teacher has looked to an ancient African philosophy to seek more deeply meaningful methods of classroom interaction, methods that affirm children’s and teachers’ ability to think, feel, and develop as human beings.

Scene I
(A Fictionalized Account)

_The year is 2092. The 100-year-old man lies on his death bed, contemplating his long life. His children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren surround him. He has lived a good life. There have been good times and bad times—he has accomplished much that he is proud of and had many experiences that he’d prefer to forget. One of his favorite grandsons looks into his eyes and asks, “Grandpa, is there anything you regret in your life?” The old man closes his eyes._

Just when his family thinks he has drifted off to sleep, he opens them again and says with an expression of deep, wistful longing, “Son, I just really wish with all my heart that I could have scored higher on the state-mandated achievement tests.”

The absurdity of that scene isn’t lost on us. And yet, we in education often allow politicians to push us to act as if the most important goal of our work is to raise test scores. Never mind the development of the human beings in our charge—the integrity, artistic expressiveness, ingenuity, persistence, or kindness of those who will inherit the earth—the conversation in education has been reduced to a conversation about one number.

The effect of such reductionism on the work we do in schools is mind-boggling. When we strip away a focus on developing the humanity of our children, we are left with programmed, mechanistic strategies, designed to achieve the programmed, mechanistic goal of raising test scores. Nowhere is the result more glaring than in urban classrooms serving low-income children of color.

Scene II
(An All Too Real Occurrence)

_The year is 2002. The inner-city classroom is filled with excited African American fifth graders. The teacher, deeply committed to her work and deemed excellent by all who have observed her, always tries to connect what the students are studying to the aspects of their lives and history. On this day she announces to the students,_

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“Okay, guys, today we’re going to talk for a few minutes about some laws called Black Codes. The Black Codes were racist laws enacted after the Civil War. There were designed to keep African Americans ‘in their place.’ For example a Black man without a job could be charged with vagrancy and end up in jail. Just think for a moment. Can you imagine how horrible it would be in jail?”

“Yes,” responds one of her charges, “I guess it would be kinda like being at school.”

“Come on,” she responds, startled by his words, “you don’t mean that.”

“Oh yes I do!”

The teacher is left to ponder that exchange for the rest of the day, not wanting to believe that her students honestly saw parallels between a prison and school, and wondering if her efforts and ideals could ever overcome the instructional and disciplinary programs mandated to “raise test scores.”

We, the authors of this paper, believe that the two stories above are related. We are two educators who have worked, together and individually, in a variety of educational settings. One of us (Lisa) is presently an education professor who spends a great deal of time in urban classrooms. The other (Paula) is presently a full-time fifth-grade teacher in a low-income African American school, and a part-time university instructor of beginning teachers.

We believe that the reductionism spawned by the testing mania has created settings in which teachers and students are treated as objects to be manipulated and “managed.” As a result of the all-consuming testing enterprise, classrooms—particularly those in low-income, urban areas—are inundated with scripted instructional programs, packaged classroom management schemes, and consultants whose job is to police teachers to ensure that all of the scripts are followed and all of the management policies implemented. The result is reflected in the words of the young man above: school is equated with prison. These words remind us that in spite of, or perhaps because of, our efforts, school for many children (and teachers) is a remarkably oppressive place to be.

Nowhere is this approach more evident than in the design of the packaged reading program recently implemented to raise test scores in Paula’s school. The constructors of the curriculum assume that the students can achieve only through repetition of small steps that require primarily rote memorization and little or no critical thinking. They seem to also assume that if teachers’ and students’ words and actions are not scripted and strictly controlled, then no learning can take place. The program is meticulously proscribed, hopelessly predictable, and timed to be executed uniformly regardless of the characteristics of the teacher or the students being served.

During the reading block, students work in teams. Teachers are instructed to manage the teams by awarding team points for students’ behavior, including getting along together, collectively participating, and completing tasks. The group work is to be painstakingly timed by the teacher, regardless of the amount of time actually needed for students to complete the tasks, so teams are typically awarded points for nonacademic tasks, such as being the first to stack their books in the center of the table, or being the first to transition quickly from one activity to the next. Each team is to begin the reading period with zero points. They must then work their way up to earning a maximum of 20 points. Thus, much of both the students’ and the teacher’s time is spent on housekeeping tasks related to keeping order, with no time for deep discussion about anything the children (or teacher) want to explore. Further, the classroom is monitored by the program’s consultants whose work is to ensure that all the rules are followed exactly.

Another mandated feature of the packaged classroom management program used in Paula’s school is the “go-around-cup.” Ostensibly designed to promote egalitarian selection of student speakers in the classroom, the name of each child is placed on a wooden craft stick and placed in a cup. The teacher must then choose a stick randomly from the cup as the teacher questions students. The strategy presumably eliminates the confusion that comes from eager voices and flailing hands vying for attention and assures that all students have the opportunity to participate and engage in the learning environment. Nonetheless, it has become the bane of some students’ existence.

“Ooh, I hate the go-around cup,” says Freddie as his teacher picks a student’s name that once again is not his. “I’m gonna hide it, Ms. Bradley. Either that, or I’m gonna throw it out!” Even as she tries to remind Freddie that eventually his stick is bound to be picked, it does little to quell the
excitement and ensuing anger that he is feeling as his teacher enacts a rule that has not accounted for the fact that he is more interested in solving the math problem today than are most of the other children. He is bursting to share his division strategy, to show the class how he got the problem right. Here is yet another example of prison-like “order” being the rule of the classroom, with teacher and students expected to behave in robotic, mechanistic, and scripted ways.

Lessons from Ancient Egypt

Paula’s school life this year is dramatically different from the experience she and Lisa shared last year at a charter middle school serving 99% African American children—Paula as the seventh-grade social studies teacher, and Lisa as a curriculum consultant. In this school, teachers were able to develop new and novel means for instruction as well as for developing the “classroom ecology.” There, in fulfilling the state requirement to teach world history, Paula delved into one of the most analyzed and admired civilizations in history, ancient Egypt. Known historically as Kemet to the indigenous people of the region, the civilization was characterized by work of the highest quality, as evidenced in their art, mathematical scripts, literature, architectural genius, and other cultural products.

As they studied this classical civilization, the students, all of African descent, became increasingly fascinated by the intricacies of the society. They were even more intrigued by the images of the Kemetic people—actual photographs of statues, paintings, and relics collected primarily by friends of the authors who had visited Egypt, rather than from textbooks. “That man looks like my cousin,” remarked one dark-skinned student. “How come they’re so black? They don’t look like the people who acted in The Mummy,” commented another. Once the students realized that Kemetic people of the earliest and the most significant of the dynasties were in fact Africans phenotypically similar to themselves, the study of the civilization took on new meaning.

The Ma’at value system

Paula harnessed this interest by exploring the Ma’at value system, which governed all aspects of Kemetic society. Ma’at, an all-encompassing system of seven principles that provided an ethical code for the living and the standard by which the dead would be judged, was first espoused in ancient Egypt and later spread throughout the African continent under several names in a variety of languages (Hilliard, 1997). These principles are truth, justice, harmony, balance, order, reciprocity, and righteousness. In order to understand the system of Ma’at, it is important to understand some of the traditional African beliefs about human beings.

Hilliard’s SBA: The Reawakening of the African Mind (1997) provides a deeper understanding of the tenets of traditional African education. Traditional African thought holds that the cosmos is divine, and that humans, as part of the cosmos, also have the potential to become divine. The goal of education must be to assist individuals in their quest for divinity or perfection, by fostering a deep understanding and guided practice of the principles of Ma’at. Following the path of Ma’at not only transforms the individual, but creates the harmonious governance of society based on ethical and natural principles and laws. Thus, the entire society would be bettered when all individuals strived for Ma’at.

The goal of traditional African thought in the area of education has always been to nurture the body, the mind, and the spirit. One could not be developed without the other. Further, it is a system designed to spur the individual to want to achieve at the highest intellectual, physical, and ethical levels, rather than to be coerced to do so.

Incorporating Ma’at in the classroom

Paula and her students took on the study of Ma’at by engaging in many discussions and much journal writing about the principles. Then the students created a Ma’at quilt, in which they took the seven virtues and interpreted them in a visually artistic fashion. For example, a student drew a picture of a scale to represent balance; one drew a group of students engaged in a roundtable discussion as a representation of justice; and another depicted a cartoon-like scene with dialogue, which showed a person thinking aloud about his intended course of action while considering the rules of reciprocity. In all, more than 30 quilt pieces were
created, mounted on chart paper, and eventually placed conspicuously on the classroom wall as a testament to understanding and embracing Ma'at.

Many discussions centered on the principles and how they applied to incidents in home life and school life, as well as to aspects of history. The students began to internalize the concepts and often solved difficulties without the teacher's intervention by making reference to the principles. Once, for example, a student yanked Ayiesha's pencil from her hand. Ayiesha, typically confrontational in the past, looked over at the quilt, then turned to Terrence, the other student, and remarked, "I don't see any reciprocity here. Would you like it if I did that to you?" Without offering a verbal response, Terrence returned the pencil and then approached the teacher to request another. This kind of self-regulation occurred often and served to confirm the belief that the virtues of Ma'at could easily be understood and applied to the classroom setting, while providing a natural outlet for exercising student leadership.

The teacher and students also developed an additional aspect of Ma'at governance. Because one goal of Ma'at was to ensure the cohesiveness and smooth operation of the societal group, individual misbehavior had to be contained for the good of the group. Sometimes, even with the most willing and able group of students, situations arise that demand a more aggressive response to ensure that the ecology of the classroom remains balanced and conducive to learning. In this classroom, always referred to as a "family," the response for destroying the balance of the group was temporary alienation from the family group.

One such scenario presented itself when Shaniqua, a student who had been in a behavior-disordered, self-contained classroom prior to transferring to this school, joined the class. On her very first day, Shaniqua was intent on becoming the center of attention, and did so by ignoring the teacher and entertaining her classmates with her animated behavior and comments. Shaniqua began by pulling a Walkman from her bookbag, putting on the headphones, and singing along with a popular rap song with the lyrics, "Don't you think I'm so sexy? I'm dressed so fresh and so clean." She was asked to give the radio to the teacher, and finally agreed to only after several minutes of arguing back and forth. The class came back to order, but this was short-lived.

When the class continued discussing the tools used in agriculture in ancient civilizations, Shaniqua repeated the word hoe, making reference to the vernacular word for whore, causing the class to erupt once more in laughter. Having then achieved a captive audience, she ignored the teacher's directives and continued using increasingly vulgar language, even chronicling her supposed sexual exploits the night before.

Even after a private conference where the teacher made clear the inappropriateness of her behavior and told of her intent to contact Shaniqua's mother later that day, her behavior remained unchanged. The teacher and students, many of whom were also beginning to lose patience with Shaniqua's disruptions, decided to invoke the ultimate response to her behavior. The class collectively progressed to the place where a student is deemed to be "out of the family." This means that for the remainder of the class, the offending student is ignored, no questions or comments elicit a response, no joke is laughed at, no actions are acknowledged. Any student choosing to engage Shaniqua in any way would join her in her temporary exclusion. The consequence does not end there, however. The student later has the opportunity to process the incident with the teacher in order to stave off future incidents, and more importantly, to enable the teacher to connect with the student's spirit in a deep and intimate way. This was successfully accomplished with Shaniqua, in part because of the willingness of her teacher to take the time to build a relationship with her, and in part because of her classmates' willingness to respect the integrity of the group and disengage from her without malice. They endorsed the notion that this action of ignoring Shaniqua benefited everyone, including the offender. The study and implementation of Ma'at made an amazing difference in Paula's classroom during that school year.

In schools serving poor and African American children there is typically little or no focus on developing the humanity, the integrity, or the thinking and leadership capacity of the children served, or the teachers who try to serve them. They are rote, robotized, and ruled by outside forces. It has
become more and more difficult to teach in ways that acknowledge that there are brilliant students before us who are constantly engaged in critical thinking about the rules we construct and the behaviors we reward. Still, both of us try to bypass some of the worst barriers to good teaching by retaining some of the required artifacts, but utilizing them in different ways. Paula, for example, subtly, but significantly subverts the point system by awarding all student groups 20 points at the outset of class, and deducting points only when students violate the balance, order, and harmony in the classroom. This better suits the conceptualization of children as fundamentally good and deserving.

Lisa has suggested to teachers that instead of picking names from the “go-around-cup,” each child be handed his or her stick (or maybe more than one stick) and be allowed to choose when to use it in class discussions. This at least allows students who are aching to contribute to do so without having to wait for some randomly assigned time, and still allows the teacher to determine who has not participated and give them an opportunity to do so.

Paula finds it particularly inane to insist, under the threat of mandated consequences, that children remain completely silent when walking in single file in the halls. After having escorted her students up and down the school corridors on six separate occasions in one day, she fully understands how students could well view school as a sort of prison, where compliance supersedes the need to be humane. She frequently risks the reprimand of her more zealous colleagues by allowing students to talk quietly in pairs or triads while moving through the school. Although there is no doubt that it is important to maintain safety, to do so in a regulated, lockstep fashion denies students important opportunities to make decisions. Students could be given the chance, for example, to regulate the tone of voice they use in the halls. They could also begin to make decisions about being completely silent if there are guests in the hallway or if another class is passing by. When school is a place where all of the decisions emanate from adults, students miss out on the chance to exercise their own thinking.

Paula recalls another situation this year when she chose to ignore the school discipline policy. While preparing for a play on the Civil War, Jonah listened intently as his teacher read a quote from Abraham Lincoln, “If I could free all of the slaves and save the Union, I would, and if I could free some of the slaves and save the Union, I would also do that, and if I could free none of the slaves and save the Union I would do that, too.” Within seconds of hearing the words, Jonah angrily yelled, “Well f—you then, Lincoln!”

A hush descended over the classroom, broken only by the hum of “Oooohs” from the students who knew that Jonah had violated a school rule against the use of profanity. Paula, however, was inwardly joyful that Jonah had honestly connected with the curriculum, that he had analyzed and interpreted the quote in much the same way that many seasoned historians have—that Lincoln was not particularly concerned with the welfare of Jonah’s ancestors. Rather, he was preoccupied with the future of the Union.

Instead of reporting Jonah to the administration for disciplinary action, Paula used her own yardstick of Ma’at as a measure and decided that Jonah’s blurt out his words was more of a testament of his commitment to truth and his anger at injustice than an affront to order in the classroom. Paula helped the class process the meaning of Jonah’s statements as a classroom family by discussing first the source of his raw emotion, then his choice of words.

When Lisa worked in Alaska, the rural Alaska Native parents would frequently bemoan their children’s school experience, telling her, “They’re making our children into robots.” She did not understand that comment for awhile, until some wise elders made her see that the school, in its attempt to regulate all the functions of the children’s lives (i.e., when to speak, when to go to the bathroom, when to get water, when to start or stop a project), was completely undermining all that Native culture was trying to instill in children. Native parents wanted their children to use their minds to determine their actions, to be aware at all times of their surroundings and to act wisely according to their careful observations. This self-governing is in total conflict with the “other-governed” procedures of school. We, in our current rush to program even more of students’ behavior in the name of

Delpit and White-Bradley

Educating or Imprisoning the Spirit
raising one questionable score, certainly risk roboti-
ing our own children, as well as our teachers.

Conclusion

Because we serve low-income African Amer-
ican and other students of color—children who are
part of a demographic group most likely to be clas-
sified as disciplinary problems or behavior disor-
dered—you might expect that our memories would
be replete with stories of children engaging in un-
ruly and dangerous acts. To the contrary, we see
thinking children who must grapple with issues of
power and control, and who for the sake of their own
humanity, often insist that their voices be heard even
as schools find new ways to silence them.

Teachers who choose to engage with the
minds and hearts of their students, to develop human
beings rather than robots, must first be willing to
develop a relationship with them individually and as
a group. They must foster the building of family, a
family that is deeply respectful of the development
of each individual and of individuals’ contribution
to the integrity of the group. The fundamental question
becomes whether we want students to speak their
truth, to become thinking and ethical human be-
ings as was the goal of the ancient Kemetians. Or
do we want to train them (and ourselves) to blind-
ly follow authoritarian dictates whether they are
sensible or not. In other words, do we want to
educate our students’ spirits or incarcerate them?

Master African healers are invariably master
teachers (Hilliard, 1997). Thus, we close with the
words of African writer, Ayi Kwei Armah (1978)
as he addresses the teacher/healer’s training:

If I’m not spiritually blind, I see your spirit. I speak
to it if I want to invite you to do something with me.
If your spirit agrees it moves your body and your
body acts. That’s inspiration. But if I’m blind to
your spirit I see only your body. Then if I want you
to do something for me I force or trick your body
into doing it even against your spirit’s direction.
That’s manipulation. Manipulation steals a person’s
body from his spirit, cuts the body off from its own
spirit’s direction. The healer is a lifelong enemy of
all manipulation. The healer’s method is inspiration.

(PP. 80-81)

Notes

1. Many thanks to Itihari Toure for her suggestion of
this term to replace the customary “classroom man-
age.”

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